

SLEEPING SENNIEL

DRAWER 9A

MEN IN RANKS

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Civil War Men in Ranks

Sleeping Sentinel

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

by officers and privates of his regiment, this petition being addressed to General Smith. Whether he or some superior officer or the president pardoned Scott, or whether the sentence was mitigated, is not of record. The fact we know is that whoever exercised mercy in this case appears to have been justified. William Scott, a native of Groton, Vermont, enrolled as a private in Company K, Third Vermont Regiment, was shot in the chest in the battle at Lee's Mills, in the vicinity of Yorktown, Virginia, April 16, 1862, and died on the following day. Perhaps Lincoln pardoned him; he pardoned many men less worthy. It is much more likely that it was not necessary to appeal to Lincoln; if his pardon had been by the president, some record should be available. We do not know. Mr. Chittenden was a truthful man and a lawyer of experience, but he was a very inaccurate historian.

The adjutant general of the army writes:

Nothing has been found of record to show that President Lincoln pardoned a Vermont soldier named William Scott sentenced to die for the offense of sleeping on post.

It is possible that a pardon for such an offense may have been granted by President Lincoln in one or more cases, (of sleeping on duty) but in the absence of the name of the soldier it would probably be impracticable to identify the record thereof.

A record has been found of the pardon by President Lincoln of a private of Company E, 3rd Regiment New York Infantry Volunteers, who had been found guilty by a general court martial, sitting at Fort Monroe, Virginia, in October, 1862, of sleeping on post, and sentenced to forfeiture of pay and allowances and confinement at hard labor for the term of one year. The President, on January 3, 1863, ordered the case examined for mitigating circumstances, and on February 28, 1863, ordered that the part of the sentence remaining unexecuted be remitted. The directions issued in the case by President Lincoln are in his handwriting.

It is shown that this soldier was subsequently honorably discharged. Nothing is found to show that he was afterwards killed.

Usually, a soldier sentenced to be shot, had against him some charge more serious than going to sleep on sentry duty. Perhaps the most frequent charge was desertion. Bounty jumping became a very profitable vocation, and was indulged in by literally thousands of men, who accepted pay for enlisting, and on the first convenient occasion deserted, and promptly accepted pay for enlisting again

under some other name in some other regiment, and then deserting again. Not many men were shot for merely getting homesick and running away; they were punished by imprisonment or loss of pay, and given hard and perhaps perilous duty. Now and then a deserter was sentenced to be shot, and in some extreme cases, deserters were shot.

Now and then a deserter, facing the practical certainty of arrest for his offense, hastened to the White House and was fortunate if he got there ahead of the officers of justice. The following letter is not known to have been published:

Executive Mansion
Washington, Feb. 24, 1865.

Today H-- H-- voluntarily calls under apprehension of being punished as a deserter. Now on condition that he serves out his term Co. A in 50th New York Engineers, he is fully pardoned for any supposed desertion.

A. Lincoln.

Romancers are under strong temptation to invent a sequel to such stories and to show how the men pardoned died bravely on the field of battle. To the right of the main corridor, just in front of the entrance of the National Museum in Washington is a facsimile of a letter from Lincoln pardoning a deserter. The letter is genuine; not so the appended note which tells that this letter was found on the body of the soldier to whom Lincoln gave it. That letter follows:

Executive Mansion
Washington, Oct. 4, 1864.

Upon condition that Roswell McIntyre of Co. E 6th Regt. of New York Cavalry returns to his Regiment and faithfully serves out his term, making up for lost time, or until otherwise lawfully discharged, he is fully pardoned for any supposed desertion heretofore committed; and this paper is his pass to go to his regiment.

A. Lincoln.

Taken from the body of R. McIntyre at the battle of Five Forks, Va., 1865.

That appended note is untrue. Roswell McIntyre was not killed in the battle of Five Forks, or in any other battle of the Civil War.

How seriously the army was suffering on account of desertions, Lincoln perhaps realized better after a visit to McClellan's army in June of 1862, for on his return to Washington, he wrote to McClellan under date of July 13, 1862:

My dear sir: I am told that over 160,000 men have gone into your army on the Peninsula. When I was with you the other day, we made out 86,500 remaining, leaving 73,500 to be accounted for. I believe 23,500 will cover all the killed, wounded, and missing in all your battles and skirmishes, leaving 50,000 who have left otherwise. Not more than 5,000 of these have died, leaving 45,000 of your army alive and not with it. I believe half or two-thirds of them are fit for duty today. Have you any more perfect knowledge of this than I have? If I am right, and you had these men with you, you could go into Richmond in the next three days. How can they be got to you, and how can they be prevented from getting away in such numbers for the future?

A. Lincoln.

LINCOLN LORE

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SLEEPING SENTINEL

Wars recall episodes which have occurred in other days of conquest. Acts of kindness and humanitarian deeds often outlive the accounts of bravery and valor of the battle field.

The story of William Scott, "The Sleeping Sentinel", has served as one of the most familiar illustrations of Abraham Lincoln's clemency. It became one of the best known incidents in contemporary history and inspired Francis de Haes Janvier to write a poem upon the theme. This poem was published with a brief introduction by T. B. Peterson and Brothers in 1863. The contents of this nineteen page booklet with the exception of a brief Shakespearean quotation is made available in this copy of *Lincoln Lore*.

"The Publishers Preface"

"The incidents here woven into verse relate to William Scott, a young soldier from the State of Vermont, who, while on duty as a sentinel at night, fell asleep, and, having been condemned to die, was pardoned by the President. They form a brief record of his humble life at home and in the field, and of his glorious death in defense of the Union.

"This poem was first read on Monday, January 19th, 1863, by Mr. James E. Murdoch, the celebrated elocutionist, to a select circle at the Executive Mansion, in the presence of the President and Mrs. Lincoln. On the evening of the same day he read it in the Senate Chamber of the United States, which was specially appropriated for the purpose,—the President and Mrs. Lincoln being again present, together with one of the largest and most distinguished audiences ever assembled in Washington. It was presented on this occasion anonymously, and produced a profound sensation.

"On the evening of February 5th, 1863, Mr. Murdoch read it, with a similar result, at the American Academy of Music, in Philadelphia, to more than three thousand persons, and then announced the name of the author. He has also read it, with the same success, in Baltimore, Albany, Boston, and other cities.

"It is now published, in compliance with a general desire for its circulation."

"The Sleeping Sentinel"

'Twas in the sultry summer-time, as War's red records show,
When patriot armies rose to meet a fratricidal foe—
When, from the North, and East, and West, like the upheaving sea,
Swept forth Columbia's sons, to make our country truly free.

Within a prison's dismal walls, where shadows veiled decay—
In fetters, on a heap of straw, a youthful soldier lay:
Heart-broken, hopeless, and forlorn, with short and feverish breath,
He waited but the appointed hour to die a culprit's death.

Yet, but a few brief weeks before, untroubled with a care,
He roamed at will, and freely drew his native mountain air—

Where sparkling streams leap mossy rocks, from many a woodland

font,
And waving elms, and grassy slopes, give beauty to Vermont!

Where, dwelling in a humble cot, a tiller of the soil,
Encircled by a mother's love, he shared a father's toil—
Till, borne upon the wailing winds, his suffering country's cry
Fired his young heart with fervent zeal, for her to live or die.

Then left he all:—a few fond tears, by firmness half concealed,
A blessing, and a parting prayer, and he was in the field—
The field of strife, whose dews are blood, whose breezes War's hot

breath,
Whose fruits are garnered in the grave, whose husbandman is Death!
Without a murmur, he endured a service new and hard;
But, wearied with a toilsome march, it chanced one night, on guard,
He sank, exhausted, at his post, and the gray morning found

His prostrate form—a sentinel, asleep, upon the ground!

So, in the silence of the night, aweary, on the sod,
Sank the disciples, watching near the suffering Son of God;—
Yet, Jesus, with compassion moved, beheld their heavy eyes,
And, though betrayed to ruthless foes, forgiving, bade them rise!

But God is love,—and finite minds can faintly comprehend
How gentle Mercy, in His rule, may with stern Justice blend;
And this poor soldier, seized and bound, found none to justify,
While War's inexorable law decreed that he must die.

'Twas night.—In a secluded room, with measured tread, and slow,
A statesman of commanding mien, paced gravely to and fro.
Oppressed, he pondered on a land by civil discord rent;
On brothers armed in deadly strife—it was the President!

The woes of thirty millions filled his burdened heart with grief;
Embattled hosts, on land and sea, acknowledged him their chief;
And yet, amid the din of war, he heard the plaintive cry
Of that poor soldier, as he lay in prison, doomed to die!

'Twas morning.—On a tented field, and through the heated haze,
Flashed back, from lines of burnished arms, the sun's effulgent blaze;
While, from a sombre prison-house, seen slowly to emerge,
A sad procession, o'er the sward, moved to a muffled dirge.

And in the midst, with faltering step, and pale and anxious face,
In manacles, between two guards, a soldier had his place.
A youth—led out to die;—and yet, it was not death, but shame,
That smote his gallant heart with dread, and shook his manly frame!

Still on, before the marshalled ranks, the train pursued its way
Up to the designated spot, whereon a coffin lay—
His coffin! And, with reeling brain, despairing—desolate—
He took his station by its side, abandoned to his fate!

Then came across his wavering sight strange pictures in the air:—
He saw his distant mountain home; he saw his parents there;
He saw them bowed with hopeless grief, through fast declining years;
He saw a nameless grave; and then, the vision closed—in tears!

Yet, once again. In double file, advancing, then, he saw
Twelve comrades, sternly set apart to execute the law—
But saw no more:—his senses swam—deep darkness settled round—
And, shuddering, he awaited now the fatal volley's sound!

Then suddenly was heard the noise of steeds and wheels approach,—
And, rolling through a cloud of dust, appeared a stately coach.
On, past the guards, and through the field, its rapid course was bent,
Till, halting, 'mid the lines was seen the nation's President!

He came to save that stricken soul, now waking from despair;
And from a thousand voices rose a shout which rent the air!
The pardoned soldier understood the tones of jubilee,
And, bounding from his fetters, blessed the hand that made him free!

'Twas Spring.—Within a verdant vale, where Warwick's crystal tide
Reflected, o'er its peaceful breast, fair fields on either side—
Where birds and flowers combined to cheer a sylvan solitude—
Two threatening armies, face to face, in fierce defiance stood!

Two threatening armies! One invoked by injured Liberty—
Which bore above its patriot ranks the Symbol of the Free;
And one, a rebel horde, beneath a flaunting flag of bars,
A fragment, torn by traitorous hands, from Freedom's Stripes and
Stars!

A sudden burst of smoke and flame, from many a thundering gun,
Proclaimed, along the echoing hills, the conflict had begun;
While shot and shell, athwart the stream with fiendish fury sped,
To strew among the living lines, the dying and the dead!

Then, louder than the roaring storm, pealed forth the stern command,
"Charge! soldiers, charge!" and, at the word, with shouts, a fearless
band,

Two hundred heroes from Vermont, rushed onward, through the
blood,

And upward, o'er the rising ground, they marked their way in blood!

The smitten foe before them fled, in terror, from his post—
While, unsustained, two hundred stood, to battle with a bost!
Then, turning as the rallying ranks, with murderous fire, replied,
They bore the fallen o'er the field, and through the purple tide!

The fallen! And the first who fell in that unequal strife,
Was he whom Mercy sped to save when Justice claimed his life—
The pardoned soldier! And, while yet the conflict raged around—
While yet his life-blood ebbed away through every gaping wound—

While yet his voice grew tremulous, and death bedimmed his eye—
He called his comrades to attest, he had not feared to die!
And, in his last expiring breath, a prayer to heaven was sent—
That God, with His unfailing grace, would bless our President!

*Editor's note—Some poetic license was used in drawing
the picture in the foregoing lines.

September 27, 1939

Mr. William D. Bosler
105-11 Farmer's Blvd.
Hollis, L. I.

My dear Mr. Bosler:

I am fearful from the tone of your letter that you have depended too much on the findings of Dr. W. E. Barton with respect to the Scott incident.

Of course, all Lincoln students are advised that Janvier used a lot of poetic license in his poem as I have tried to indicate in the footnote, and no one that I know of believes that Lincoln rushed out in a carriage to put on the dramatic episode which Janvier creates.

If you will read Abraham Lincoln and the Sleeping Sentinel of Vermont written by Waldo S. Glover and published by the Vermont Historical Society in 1936 I believe you will find plenty of evidence to support Lincoln's part in the pardon of the sleeping sentinel.

Very truly yours,

LAW:BS

Director

LINCOLN LORE

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CLEMENCY FOR SLEEPERS

The reaction of Abraham Lincoln to violations of military regulations which occurred at the beginning of the war contributed much towards establishing precedents with respect to the punishment of subsequent offenders. One of the most frequently broken statutes which called for the death penalty was "sleeping at the post." William Scott, a Vermont volunteer was one of the first men sentenced on this charge which came to the notice of the President.

The case of "The Sleeping Sentinel" deserves much more attention than it has been accorded by historians as it set the pattern for the adjustment of an antiquated military code enacted for the purpose of controlling mercenary troops. Disciplinary measures for a volunteer army composed of many young boys from the rural districts needed drastic revisions and the Commander in Chief was one of the first officers to see the injustice of many laws calling for capital punishment.

The story of Scott although widely publicised at the time has had much difficulty in gaining acceptance. Dr. W. E. Barton at one time believed it to be largely legendary and in his *Life of Lincoln* published in 1925 he stated with reference to the Scott incident, "There is no evidence that Lincoln ever knew of the case." In the files of the Lincoln National Life Foundation there is a letter written by a New York lawyer dated as late as September 19, 1939, which states: "In number 544 of Lincoln Lore I note the story of William Scott. The whole story is just a myth."

Walter F. Glover prepared an argument in 1936 under the title *Abraham Lincoln and the Sleeping Sentinel of Vermont* which was published by the Vermont Historical Society. It is by far the most authentic discussion on the Scott episode. He not only supports with documentary evidence the story of the progress of the case against Scott but relying upon exhibits consisting of contemporary writings builds a strong case for the historical accuracy of certain incidents that heretofore had been considered traditional.

William Scott enlisted on July 10, 1861, at Montpelier as a private in Company K, Third Vermont Regiment. He arrived with his company in Washington on July 26 and on the following day was quartered at Camp Logan near Chain Bridge which crossed the Potomac about six miles above Washington.

On the night of September 3 the brigade of which Scott was a member moved from the Washington end of Chain Bridge across the Potomac to a point one mile from the Virginia end of the bridge. The new encampment was called Camp Advance.

The files in the War Department at Washington reveal that Scott "did go to sleep upon his post, thus at the hour between three and four A. M. on the 31st day of August, 1861, while on picket guard, near Camp Lyon, D. C." and that he was found guilty and sentenced to "be shot to death on Monday the 9th of September, 1861, at such hour and place as the Brigade Commander may determine." The sentence was "approved by Major General McClellan" and the death warrant dated September 4 sent to Brig. Gen. W. F. Smith, commanding officer at Chain Bridge.

On September 7, three days after the sentence, officers and privates in the 3rd Regiment sent a petition to General Smith that William Scott "now under sentence of death may be spared." The following day, September 8, the day before the date set for the execution, General McClellan wrote a letter to his wife in which he said, "Mr. Lincoln came this morning to ask me to pardon a

man that I had ordered to be shot." Later on the same day McClellan signed a reprieve for Scott because of the earnest appeals of the soldiers, Scott's good character, and also for the reason that "The President of the United States has expressed a wish that as this is the first condemnation to death in this army for this crime, mercy may be extended to the criminal."

Contemporary news articles, soldiers letters and Scott family reminiscences are unanimous in the conclusion that the influence of Abraham Lincoln was chiefly responsible for saving the life of Scott.

One phase of the episode which has been treated as fictional is the tradition that President Lincoln himself carried the reprieve out to the camp six miles from Washington to make sure that the execution did not take place and there seems to be evidence both for and against this personal initiative on the part of the President of the United States. This whole question has been reopened again during these September days in 1947 because some added evidence has come from the testimony of an eye witness who observed Mr. Lincoln at the camp.

The Lincoln National Life Foundation has recently acquired a rare eight page pamphlet which all bibliographers seem to have missed. It is entitled *A Soldier's Recollection of Abraham Lincoln* by James S. Botsford and published in 1904. Mr. Botsford recalls incidents which he observed during the five different times he saw Abraham Lincoln during the war and the one of special interest he sets forth in these words:

"The next time I saw Mr. Lincoln was in the following September (1861). We had marched across the Potomac into Virginia, and were camped about a mile northwest of Chain Bridge, just above Old Georgetown. Our regiment had received the post of honor in the brigade commanded by General Hancock. The second brigade in our division was composed of five regiments from the State of Vermont. In one of those regiments was a soldier by the name of Scott, who one night went to sleep on his post while on the picket guard, and who was afterwards court-martialed and sentenced to be shot. His family and kindred and friends in Vermont interceded with President Lincoln in his behalf, and the result was that the President commuted his sentence to a reprimand in front of his regiment. This commutation, however, did not reach the division until the day before the execution was to take place. On the day before the execution was to take place, our brigade and the Vermonters were engaged in building forts; and our immediate command was engaged in building Fort Marcy, which stood on the side of the pike going north from Chain Bridge to Drainsville, Virginia. While we were thus engaged in building that fort, there came up during the afternoon from Chain Bridge a carriage, and as the carriage approached the fort that we were building it was seen that in it were President Lincoln and his Private Secretary. President Lincoln had come out with the commutation for young Scott."

We have General McClellan's own statement that the President visited him on the morning of September 8 to request a pardon for a condemned soldier. The same day McClellan signed the reprieve for Scott and it would be characteristic of Lincoln to follow through with this first important commutation for sleeping at the post by delivery with his own hand this precedent making document. The observation by Private Botsford who claimed to have seen the President on this important mission is at least worthy of consideration.





